Qin Heping is professor of history at the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, Sichuan. In 2003, he published a well-received work on the spread of Christianity among the southwestern minorities (Jidu zongjiao zai xinan minzu diqu de chuanbo shi). In this most recent volume, Qin turns his attention toward the history of Christianity in (primarily) ethnically Han areas of Sichuan, approaching the subject in terms of the indigenization (bensehua) of Christianity in the region. As he describes it, this is the story of “the process by which ‘the other’ became ‘us’” (preface, 10). Qin, by taking this avenue of understanding, follows the general tendency among Chinese scholars writing about the history of Christianity in China (cf. recent work by Tao Feiya and Liu Jiafeng, among others).

Qin’s “Christianity” refers to both the Catholic and Protestant varieties. The narrative begins with the earliest activities of Italian Catholic missionaries in Sichuan at the end of the Ming Dynasty and ends with Protestant medical work at the end of the Republic (1949). Along the way, Qin weaves back and forth between the two in a generally chronological fashion. Qin is interested in the experience of both the missionary and the Chinese believer. Neither is slighted, though the sources do necessarily drive Qin more toward the elite in either case. Qin’s primary source base is wide and includes missionary writings, numerous county gazetteers from across Sichuan, the copious archival material of the late-Qing “missionary cases” (jiao’an), and a few recollections recorded after the founding of the People’s Republic. Taken together, all this makes Qin’s “Christianity” more comprehensive than one ordinarily finds in either Chinese or English writings on the subject.

On Catholicism, readers will find some consonance between Qin’s book and work done by Robert Entenmann and D.E. Mungello. Qin shares with them an interest in telling the story of Catholic experience in China from the grass-roots, avoiding overly-intellectualized history that focuses endlessly on the Chinese Rites Controversy, term debates, or the Boxers. (Though the novice reader need not be afraid, Qin does provide more than adequate background on such topics as well). Following the Yongzheng Emperor’s 1724 proscription of missionary activity, Qin traces the continued clandestine mission work and the varied means...
by which, though under uneven pressure from the state, Catholicism continued to spread by means such as publishing doctrinal tracts and an intensification of women’s education, in order to spread the faith at home. Qin is also very interested in the finance of Catholic operations in Sichuan, noting that unlike their Protestant counterparts, they could never rely on the largess of American, British or Canadian sending organizations. Instead, after 1860 legalization, the Church took to buying up large amounts of land and properties in the Sichuan Basin, which in turn they rented out for profit. This method, which ironically might be considered more indigenous than the Protestant reliance on overseas funds, often led to landlord/tenant conflicts that easily spilled over into a generalized anti-Catholic sentiment. Finally, Qin shows, quite contrary to the way some Protestant-orientated scholars write, that early twentieth century Catholics in Sichuan warmly embraced educational and medical activities as part of their mission.

Regarding Protestantism in Sichuan, Qin is careful to distinguish denominational difference. Major players, like the China Inland Mission, are of course covered, but so are the activities of lesser-known groups like the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Writers more interested in theology or the history of ideas have suggested that Protestant factionalism weakened its ability to find acceptance in China. Qin, on the contrary, finds that, in the case of Sichuan at least, the Protestant divisions allowed for a greater amount of flexibility in adapting to local conditions. Also unlike earlier Chinese works that found Protestant activity to be the “vanguard of imperialism,” Qin focuses on the ways in which Chinese Protestant believers in Sichuan were mobilized for Chinese nationalist and reformist causes. In one amusing and telling incident, Qin describes the nightly prayer meetings in 1911 at Guanghan’s Gospel Church. The assembled believers always prayed for the well-being of the Railway Protection Movement’s activists and the enlightenment of the Xuantong Emperor. No matter what one thinks of the efficacy of prayer, these meetings were effective propaganda for the reformist cause, as Sichuan media spread the word around the province about Christian support for the Movement and, in Qin’s words, helped to “wash clean the dirty word ‘foreign religion’ (yangjiao)” (p. 170).

A work this wide-ranging is bound to have some weak points. Though not disparaging Chinese Catholicism, Qin plainly believes that Protestantism more successfully transformed itself into a Chinese religion. He may or may not be right (church membership today would seem to bear him out, official statistics put the numbers at about 3:1 in favor of Protestants), but surely Qin’s emphasis on modern medical and educational structures as keys for indigenization of the Church has more than a hint of teleology. Another lacuna is the lack of a formal conclusion. Being of such large scope, the disparate threads of Catholic and Protestant, nation and local place, conflict and accommodation, missionary and